

CONGRESSMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)
FLOOR STATEMENT ON H.R. 798, METH ACT
December 13, 2005

Mr. Speaker, I rise in strong support of H.R. 798, legislation to combat an insidious aspect of the methamphetamine crisis – the environmental consequences and the potential harm to those with no connection to the drug’s manufacture or use.

I want to thank my colleagues, Mr. Gordon and Mr. Calvert, for their active pursuit of this issue, which is of great concern to states and localities that have to deal with the aftermath of “busting” meth labs.

Over the past decade, methamphetamine, or meth, has spread across the country, killing individuals, destroying families and devastating communities. The meth epidemic needs to be attacked on many levels, but we also have to deal with the harmful residues that meth leaves behind in homes and in the soil.

Earlier this year, I visited with Sheriff Gary Howard of Tioga County, which is located in the southern tier of New York in my Congressional District.. Between 1989 and 1999, he indicated there were only four meth lab “incidents” reported for the entire state of New York. Since then, the number of seized meth labs has risen quickly and steadily – from 8 in 2000 to 73 in 2003. Of that number, most were found in Tioga County.

Sheriff Howard described the terrible human tragedies associated with meth use, including the inherent danger to law enforcement from paranoid and agitated addicts, but he also told me that anyone who lived near or had reason to visit these active and former labs were at risk from unseen hazardous chemicals and dangerous byproducts of meth production.

During the manufacture of meth, harmful chemicals are released into the air and distributed throughout the surrounding area. In residential settings, these chemicals penetrate and adhere to countertops and floors, they are absorbed into furnishings, carpets and walls, and their toxic byproducts are frequently poured down drains or spilled onto the ground, potentially contaminating the soil and drinking wells.

While few studies have been conducted on the long term consequences of exposure to these chemicals, many of the ingredients used in the manufacture of meth are highly caustic and, upon exposure, are believed to damage the skin, eyes, and lungs.

Yet, as witnesses testified before the Science Committee, we do not have the scientific knowledge to deal responsibly with former meth labs. Little is known about the risks of moving into a house that has been used as a meth lab, the best way to remediate a former lab so the building can be safely occupied, or the long-term effects on those living in the former labs, including children and the elderly.

States and localities are struggling to protect the public from the adverse effects of meth, yet there are no national guidelines on how to remediate a residential lab for reoccupation or what levels of residues are safe. States have become increasingly concerned about the cleanup and remediation issues related to meth labs, and state officials and law enforcement have requested assistance in dealing with the growing number of small labs in their states, particularly those located in residential settings.

H.R. 798 should go a long way toward giving states the assistance they need to protect the wider population from meth residues.

The bill requires the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to establish voluntary guidelines for the remediation of former meth labs. These guidelines will combine the best of all existing and new information to help states and local governments respond effectively to this growing problem. The bill also requires the EPA to support research to identify persistent chemicals of concern in the use and manufacture of meth, to determine the most effective cleanup and remediation techniques, and to develop assessment and remediation guidance for states and localities based on the short- and long-term consequences of these former residential labs.

Finally, the bill enlists the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) to support the development of new testing methods to help law enforcement identify and quantify the risks of meth lab sites in the field.

This is a sensible, targeted, bipartisan bill, which, for a modest investment, will help our state and local governments safeguard our communities from the consequences of these toxic neighborhood labs.

For this reason, H.R. 798 has been endorsed by the National Association of Counties, the Fraternal Order of Police, the National Association of Realtors, the National MultiHousing Council and the National Apartment Association, the National Sheriffs' Association, and the National Narcotics Officers' Associations' Coalition.

In conclusion, I want to thank the Leadership, particularly Mr. Blunt, for enabling this bill to come to the floor, and I want to thank Mr. Souder for his help in this matter. This bill will make a real difference in our communities. I urge its passage.